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A Single Decision (Take Two)

By: Timewatch (/u/1698214/Timewatch)  (https://www.fanfiction.net/pm2/post.php?uid=1698214)

Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Author's note: Get your drinks and snacks again, this is another long one.

Chapter 39

"And it was the Supreme Chancellor himself who pulled the *Incomparable* away from Kuat, just for it to be ravaged by the vile trickery of Grievous!" The Kuati spoke to the Senate. Tarkin didn't even know his name, he didn't care. "The fault for this terrible defeat must be laid squarely on his shoulders!"

The Senate erupted into booing and jeering, targeting both sides. "Order, order!" called the Vice Chancellor, Sate Pestage. While Tarkin didn't fully trust either of Sheev Palpatine's old accomplices, he didn't want them going against him either. Tarkin would keep friends close, and-potential-enemies closer.

"The Senator from Kuat should be reminded that the *Incomparable* remains in one piece and is en route back to his system," Tarkin told the Senate in a cold voice. "And let me emphasize: the losses Grievous suffered at Vinsoth hurt him far more than the losses we suffered hurt us. Tactically, we were defeated. Strategically, the situation favors us."

"And what of Agamar?" asked the senator for the Cademimu Sector. "The fleet's withdrawn to Paarin Minor, the Separatists will be free to reinforce it. That is unacceptable!"

"What of Agamar?" countered the senator from Humbarine, Bana Breemu. Tarkin knew her well, she'd become one of the most anti-Separatist politiciansin the entire Senate, after Grievous had turned her home planet into a molten wasteland. "What value is there to us on Agamar? A backwater planet of dirt-farming peasants has no use to the Republic."

"If anything, losing Agamar would reduce the occurrence of incest in the Republic's crime statistics," Sate Pestage muttered, with a smirk. Tarkin did his best not to smile too during such serious proceedings.

"Control of sector defense forces should fall to the sectors' rightful authorities: their local governments," the senator from Kuat went on. "I've drafted a bill for this, in fact. No more disastrous interference from the executive branch! Look what's happened to Duro, and Humbarine, and now Kuat too! Stripped of defenses, for no gain!"

That was a bill which would throw a wrench into Tarkin's plans bigger than any Grievous could even dream of. "This is tantamount to treason, senator," Tarkin said.

"It is not treason to protect one's home!" answered the senator.

Again, the Senate exploded into shouting and jeering. Not for the first time in the short while he'd been Chancellor, Tarkin thought about how nice it would be to just dissolve the Senate. *All in good time*, he told himself. *All in good time...*

Esera had grown up on Coruscant, and she'd rarely left it until the war began. Going to new planets was always a delight; it'd been one of the few pleasures she had in the past three and a half years. But Caramm... Esera didn't know if she could call it a delight.

From orbit, the planet had looked barren and colorless, and the descent to the capital only confirmed that. *Whirlwind* flew across a great empty plain, marked only by swirling columns of dust and ash, and the occasional stands of skeletal trees, with not one leaf on their spindly branches. In the Force, Esera could barely feel a thing. This land was dead. The further they flew, the hazier it got, until the setting sun was gone, merely a distant glow behind a slab of grey.

"Creepy," said Zule Xiss.

"Not even the deserts back home were this barren," Lieutenant Voyan muttered.

"How dreary," Alize said. The Zygerrian had insisted on coming with, this time, and Esera had acquiesced. What harm could it do? All three of Esera's living passengers were crowded at the front of *Whirlwind's* little upper cabin, while Grievous's two magnagaurds waited below. "What happened to this planet?"

"The price of unification," said Xiss. "All of Caramm, under one banner for the first time in a thousand years. All it took was... this."

The group was quiet for a time. Then they saw the vague shadows on the murky horizon. It took many minutes to reach them. Amazement rolled off the three passengers in the Force, as the shadows continued to loom larger and larger. *Whatever they are, each one is as big as the Senate building... if not bigger*, thought Esera. They were great, hulking things, belching fumes from chimneys, the source of all the haze.

Alize broke the silence this time. "What are those?" she asked.

"Factories, I think," Voyan replied. "Ado Eemon is a major contributor of materiel for the war effort. He sub-contracts for the Techno Union."

The smog thinned out once they were past; they must have been flying against the wind. The sun had set, and Esera soon became witness to a kind of urbanity she'd never seen before. The world-wide skyline of Coruscant was one thing, as were the glittering cosmopolitan icons of culture like Raxulon and Theed, and sprawling Ibisa's painted-on glamour hiding the grit; she'd even seen ancient, tightly packed towns like Veldevale, relics of a bygone age. This city, though, was like an ocean of yellow-orange lights, frozen in time. It rolled up and down across hills and ridges like waves, on and on, in a vast grid of duracrete high-rises and speeder highways. They gave way to glassy towers, dotted with colorful holoscreens, growing taller and taller the closer they got to the massive object looming over them all, which could only have been their destination. A great pyramid-like cone rose out of the city, a mountain awash in light; they were headed straight for it.

"It's certainly bigger than the palace back home," Alize said.

Whirlwind began her landing sequence, as the blast doors on a hangar bay yawned open. Esera was not surprised to see a reception already waiting- and an armed one, at that. A squad of guards stood in rank at attention, led by an officer. Descending from the ramp, Esera was sure the sight of her gang was the most interesting thing these guards had seen all day: one short girl in a Raxian dress, one reedy mechanic-and-engineer in his worn-out Trade Federation uniform, one Zeltron woman with a mechanical arm, and one huge Zygerrian who looked like she was about to hit the finest wine bars of Ibisa. To top it off, they had two magnaguards following them.

"Captain Komara, welcome to Caramm V," said the officer, politely bowing.

"Thank you," said Esera. "I suppose you'll want us to disarm?"

"That won't be necessary. Mister Eemon says General Grievous will kill you all if you raise a finger against him," the officer said. "Please, follow me, you're awaited."

Well, he's blunt, thought Esera. The banners in this massive building were all blue, with the yellow triple-spiral emblem that was very familiar to her. *Oh*, she realized, *a lot of the ships in Invisible Hand's hangar have that stamped on them. This must be the place they came from.* It made sense Grievous wanted one of his best weapons suppliers unharmed. Not that Esera came intending to do harm.

Clean was the best word for the interior of Ado Eemon's giant pyramid-like cone of a palace. It had been designed with a minimalist's hand, every unnecessary detail and decoration stripped away, the light was gentle yet everywhere, and blank silvery grey halls curved away, following the shape of the building. Esera noticed her own reflection on the polished floor; it reminded her of certain Republic military installations. Her band of misfits stood out as splashes of color in this sterile building.

The officer brought them to a large chamber, where a table was set. Beyond it was a window that stretched from wall to wall, and from floor to ceiling. At this window stood a man, hardly dressed any differently from the guards, hands behind his back, staring out at the city. He turned to face them.

"Captain Komara, it's a pleasure to meet you in person," Ado Eemon said. He was only a little shorter than his son, but in person, his aged-but-handsome looks were even more striking. His shoulders were brought and strong, and while he was not as slim as Ricimer, he had an air of complete confidence; in body language, voice, and in the Force too. The elder Eemon's silver hair and beard matched his palace well.

"Likewise... sir," said Esera, unsure of how to address him, her focus broken by Eemon's presence. Eemon smiled.

"If you want to be formal, I am the Warlord of All Caramm. But most just call me Mister Eemon."

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you too, Mister Eemon," said Esera, trying to ignore the heat in her cheeks as Eemon shook her hand with a firm but gentle grip. "I've brought some of my crew with me. Lieutenant Miha Voyan, my first officer. Alize, my cook. And, uh, Zule Xiss. She's, um, not really part of my crew. Just along for the ride, really."

Eemon raised an eyebrow. "Zule Xiss? The same Zule Xiss that that Jabiimi rascal, Thorne Kraym, mentioned to me? I hope you're not here on official business."

"No, sir," said Xiss, failing to hide her sudden anxiety. She edged her way behind Alize, who was much more willing to talk to Eemon.

"Zule's a good girl, she won't be causing you any trouble," Alize told the Warlord of All Caramm. *I doubt that very much*, Esera wanted to say, but she held her tongue.

"I can't say I've ever met a Zygerrian in the flesh before," Eemon said, clasping her hand. "You're a long way from home, Alize. I hope you'll find your accommodations most hospitable."

"I'm seeing the Galaxy before I get too old," she answered. Between the two of them, Alize was doing much better than Esera at not being thrown off by Eemon's charm. Probably because she was in her forties and hadn't been raised in a cloistered temple of celibate zealots.

"Please, everyone, sit, we have much to discuss," said Eemon, gesturing to the table. He took his place at the head, with Esera and Voyan to his right and Alize and Xiss to his left. The Zeltron looked relieved to have Alize's bulk separate her from Eemon. She wanted to draw as little attention to herself as possible. Something belatedly occurred to Esera: *Eemon knows the Jabiimis, and knows they turned her into an assassin.* If the Carammites tried to send Xiss back to Jabiiim against her will, Esera was going to be in a tough place.

"Your planet's seen better days," Esera said, as they sat.

"Ah, yes, the ravages of war. A regretful thing, but necessary," Eemon said. In the Force, it was clear he had no regrets at all about what had happened to his home. "We are one people, one race, one Carammite nation, united. I've done what a dozen generations before me could not."

"Might I ask what caused these ravages, sir?" Voyan asked, speaking for the first time since they'd landed.

"An aerosol defoliant, of sorts. Like poison gas, for plants. My enemies hid in the forests and jungles, so I removed anything for them to hide in," Eemon said. "I sold off the remaining stock years ago to a man with the curious name of Tyranus."

Esera was glad they weren't eating yet, because she would have choked at the mention of that name. That her attention had been caught did not escape the Warlord of Caramm, who locked eyes with her for one moment too long to be anything but a silent message that he knew that she knew that name.

The group and Eemon exchanged polite small talk until dinner arrived, with Alize's occasional interruption becoming more frequent as the extroverted Zygerrian fell into her element, and the introverted Esera was all too happy to back away. Dinner provided Esera a total respite from Eemon's attention. Carammite food was interesting: there were no animal products. Her favorite dish was some kind of spiced, mashed-up bean mix rolled into little balls and fried in oil. Undoubtedly, it wasn't the healthiest food, but Esera's lifestyle was so active that it wouldn't be a problem.

But after dinner came what she'd been dreading: the questions.

"So, my dear Captain Komara," Eemon said, making her blush again, "tell me about how you saved the Confederacy."

"Well, it wasn't really anything big," said Esera, looking at her cleared dinner plate. "I was just in the right place at the right time..."

"There's that humility I expect from someone of your background," Eemon said.

Alize raised an eyebrow, and Esera had the chilling epiphany that her cook had no idea what she had so recently been. *I really need to talk to her about that*, thought Esera. "So, I was down with the other representatives when everything went to hell. I heard the blasters and..."

She launched into the story of the coup, omitting how her lightsaber had been more responsible for Grievous's victory than she had, and omitting all her reflections on the morality of helping Grievous in the first place. It was more sanitized than the story she'd given the Sephi sisters, and even that had left out some facts. *Jedi aren't supposed to lie*, thought Esera, when she noticed Xiss's skeptical expression aimed her way. But some things were just better left unsaid.

"Who would have thought our adorable little captain was so important?" Alize asked, beaming in pride.

"Alize..." groaned Esera, blushing even brighter.

Naturally, Voyan had picked up on everything she hadn't said. "Captain, you failed to mention *why* you helped the General. You've said many times you hate this war. Letting Grievous be captured and sold to the Republic would have ended it."

"Would it have?" asked Esera. "Or would the Republic be fighting, like, fifty billion Separatist splinter states?" That got a smile out of Eemon. "Grievous is a strong ruler, no one can doubt that. By choosing to preserve Grievous, I preserved the unity of the Separatist state, and kept hope for a peaceful resolution in the future, for *all* of us."

"Grievous? Peace? You're optimistic, my dear," said Eemon.

"Maybe," Esera said. "Maybe I'm a dumb little girl who keeps ending up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or maybe I'm the kind of woman the Galaxy needs, here to bring an end to this war any way I can. I don't know, Mister Eemon. I really don't. But here *I* am, whatever I might be, and I'm going to do the best I can while I can. If not me, then who? If not now, then when?"

"Marvelous, absolutely marvelous," Eemon said, shaking his head in amazement. "If only my boy Ricimer had your initiative, Captain, I would feel much better about my planet's future."

"I met him a few weeks ago, after the battle of Kashyyyk," said Esera. "He said he was the one who'd protested against Hithlu's attempted slaughter of the surrendering Loyalist fleet."

Eemon smirked. "I hope you didn't believe that. I know Ricimer, he lacks his brother's decisive spirit. I fear there's too much of his mother in him." While Eemon's face showed amusement, Esera felt something very different inside him. The mere mention of Ricimer's mother had stirred up a bittersweet fondness in his heart, perhaps the most genuine thing Esera had felt from this man all night.

"I didn't know he had a brother," Esera said.

"Had, yes. Hermeric died in a speeder crash some few years before the war, unfortunately. I would have preferred him to inherit my planet, but fate is a fickle thing." Eemon sighed wistfully. "It'll be a bloodbath the very first day I'm gone. I almost wish I'd be able to stick around and watch. Poor Ricimer, he's just not cut out to rule, but he believes it's his unavoidable destiny. He'll never walk away quietly."

When that day came, Esera hoped she'd be very far from Caramm.

"Speaking of the future, there is something I'd like to discuss with you in private, Captain Komara," said Eemon. "A matter of security, both for Caramm and the Confederacy."

"Alright," said Esera. The matter of Tyranus was something she was assigned to work on, along with the matter of Sidious. For now, Grievous was too distracted with the war to bother with it, but Esera had plenty of time to investigate more. Caramm would be a good place to start.

"Can you trust him?" Voyan whispered to her. "You know what happened last time an autocrat had you alone with him..."

"I'm not drunk this time," whispered Esera back. "And I'm armed."

Eemon must have heard them, but all he offered was his usual affable smile. As their dinner ended, Esera gave each of her crew a job to do. Alize would talk to the kitchen staff and learn what she could there, Xiss would avoid Carammite entanglements, and Voyan would make sure Xiss stayed out of trouble. Then it was off to Ado Eemon's study, where Esera nervously anticipated what she could learn about the late Count Dooku's dealing with this dictator, and why he'd used his Sith name here.

Scouting probes reported that the Republic fleet above Agamar had suddenly left the system, most likely for Paarin Minor. Grievous rolled his eyes. *They've been denying us battle ever since Vinsoth*, he thought. But it was likely for the best. The Separatist fleet had taken even more damage than the Loyalist. All they had now was their logistical edge.

"Dofine, how much time is left?" he asked.

"Twenty minutes at most before we reach Agamar, General," said Dofine.

"I will be with the troops in the hangar."

"Yes, sir."

Grievous stalked through the corridors of *Invisible Hand* with his magnaguards. The ship was uncharacteristically busy, with several Neimoidian gunnery battalions aboard. Once, Grievous had thought that these green men in their bronze armor and strange slugthrowers were just ornamental decorations to make cretins like Nute Gunray and Rune Haako feel more important. The events of the coup had taught him otherwise. The Neimoidians who'd held the Raxulon space port had put up a truly ferocious fight before yielding. They had fought with honor and valor enough for any Kaleesh. One had even nearly killed Grievous, and would have had it not been for Komara. The courage and comradery he'd seen from them that day had convinced him that these soldiers were the equal of any clone trooper. Perhaps more than an equal. Clone troopers were bred to be what they were, these Neimoidians had chosen this life of their own free will.

Several battalions and their shuttles crowded the hangar deck; brought up from the bays below, while the ship's Vulture droids hung charging on their ceiling racks. The Neimoidians stood at attention the moment they saw Grievous enter the hangar, each squad in front of their shuttle, officers out front. Grievous plugged his voice into the hangar speakers. He would waste no time on speeches, though, these men didn't need a morale boost.

"Continue your preparations," Grievous told them.

"Yes, sir!" came the chorus of voices answering him. Immediately, the Neimoidians began boarding their ships. They were modified *Sheathipedes*, with flat-footed landing legs and ball turrets on the 'chin' of the craft, much like the much-maligned LAAT of the enemy. The cargo bays had been enlarged and the whole ship was armored. Grievous and his magnaguards boarded one as well. That surprised all the Neimoidians aboard, though little did they know, this shuttle had not been chosen at random.

"General?" asked the Neimoidian lieutenant, shocked.

"They will not be looking for me among you," said Grievous. "I am not here."

"Very well, sir," said the Neimoidian, with a nod. He continued going over his pre-drop checklist. Despite them being aliens, Grievous could read the mood in the shuttle's bay. These soldiers had been ready to do their duty, confident in their abilities. But with Grievous physically among them, an energy began to spread through the squad. *What can stop us now?* they seemed to be thinking.

"*All personnel, prepare for drop. Time is minus three minutes,*" said a voice on the hangar's intercom, no doubt an officer in *Invisible Hand's* ground operations control room. The Neimoidians were well-equipped. Besides their slugthrowers, each man carried a rocket, while the three biggest troopers carried the launchers. Grievous's heads-up display told him the rocket's warhead could be set to any variety of shaped charges, or to omni-directional fragmentation. They were a grade above the usual rockets issued to droid infantry, no doubt because of their expense. But Grievous trusted the Neimoidian soldiers to know how to use their weapons.

Grievous took up a position where he could loom over the pilots silently. They were professionals, they didn't let him distract them. The two magnaguards he was bringing flanked him. From the shuttle's bay, the lieutenant spoke:

"We are going in with the first wave!" said the officer to his men. "The enemy won't be expecting us. Our allies might not either. Corporal, I want you in contact with the Agamarian artillery the moment we're out. The rest of you, smash the entire area. You kill any-" for the briefest moment, the Neimoidian paused before he said *Human*, remembering just who the Agamarians were, "-thing wearing plastoid armor, you get me?"

"We get you, sir!" said the troopers.

"Outstanding," the lieutenant said. Grievous noted his and his men's accents were very similar to Captain Hatha. *Low caste*, he thought. *They should be running Neimoidian civilization.*

The shuttle's engines spooled up, and soon they were blasting out of the hangar with the rest of them. The burned wastelands of Agamar waited below. Grievous could see the front lines already, through the heads-up display, little glowing lines of red and blue snaking across the continents, wherever there were vast plumes of smoke.

While the fleet had fled, the Loyalists on Agamar had their own defenses. Missiles and lasers shot up to meet the shuttles, while Separatist Vulture droids and Tri-fighters zipped ahead to sweep open a path to the surface. Their descent was fast and hard, their pilots didn't fire the braking thrusters until they were a mere few thousand meters above the surface. The shuttle plunged through the opaque sheet of smoke covering the land, a red glow growing greater as each second ticked by. Grievous and his magnaguards magnetized their feet to the shuttle floor as it violently shook. An explosion rocked the ship, but what it was, none could say in the sightless haze.

"Remember your training," called the Neimoidian lieutenant to his men in encouragement, "and you will make it back alive!"

And then, a final shock shook them all, and they were on the ground. Grievous let the troopers rush out first, after they'd put on their breathing masks, before calmly departing. Two micron-thin lenses closed over his eyes to isolate them from toxins and particles in the polluted air.

The Neimoidians had dropped right into the front. To Grievous's west, sheets of flame consumed a stand of massive trees, burning pillars stretching into the smoke above. To his east, an artillery-pummeled ridge stood, where red blaster bolts leapt from. *That's our side*, he thought, his heads-up display confirming friendly units were on the ridgeline. To the south and north were the abandoned remains of a town, scattered buildings and warehouses lining a small road. The droid network announced the presence of enemy forces to the south, and the Neimoidians were already rushing that way under what cover they could find.

What a delightful hellscape, Grievous thought, basking in the suffocating heat and nerve gas-laced, ash-laden air. *This is what we could have done to the huk worlds...* Kalani would be an honorary Kaleesh for what he'd done here, if he weren't a droid.

Rockets screamed forth up ahead, where the Neimoidians were putting their ordnance to good use. A blaster-scorched wall tumbled over, and grey figures scrambled out of its way. Grievous zoomed in on them with his eye implants. Those weren't clones, those were Loyalist auxiliaries. *Easy!*

As he stalked forward, though, those auxiliaries showed themselves to be anything but easy targets. The battle unfolding before him was not the clash of relentless droids and clones, fighting to the death because that was their purpose, but a contest of maneuvering and flanking between highly-motivated professional volunteers. Every man on this battlefield was here because he'd decided to be here. *Men and women*, Grievous noted, as the droid network analyzed data coming in from the Neimoidians. These Loyalists were well-armed, strong, and courageous in the way "civilized" planets regarded courage: that was, keeping calm under fire and always finding a way to return pressure on the enemy. The bold bravado of a Kaleesh warrior would be entirely out of place in a war like this, Grievous reluctantly had to admit. *This may not be so easy after all, if their auxiliaries are warriors of this caliber...*

Grievous watched the dance for over an hour, as each side tried to force the other out of its positions between the ridge and the burning trees. The blaster fire from the ridge was neither accurate nor sustained. It was manned by Agamarian conscripts. Grievous didn't care about them, he was waiting for someone else. The Neimoidians had been right to bring slugthrowers; while blasters cauterized wounds, slugs tore open armor and flesh alike, exposing the target to the invisible toxic miasma. He saw many a Loyalist wounded by a slugthrower only to drop to the ground minutes later, as the omnipresent nerve gas shut down their body, suffocating them to death. This was one of the more interesting battlefields Grievous had visited in the course of the war.

Out of the smoke, a column of AT-TEs stomped forward, escorted by clone troopers in white armor appropriately modified with burnt orange markings. The legion of the Vodran Jedi General Daijyun. The lightsaber gave away Daijyun's position immediately, a blue blade flashing against the red flames and black sky. The onslaught was too great for the Neimoidians to handle alone, they were being pushed back. The droid network stirred with activity, and the Agamarians began their attack. They had precious little in the way of heavy firepower, but their infantry went out all the same, miserably under-equipped for the conditions they were in. Conscripts with only the most rudimentary protections from chemical warfare and hand blasters were going up against Jedi, clones, tanks, and Loyalist volunteer soldiers from a rich planet that spared no expense on its troops. *That* was the kind of courage Grievous knew from his past life.

The Agamarians were more of a distraction than anything else, diverting attention away from the Neimoidians and allowing them to regroup. From up north, a platoon of Neimoidian tanks and personnel carriers arrived, looking like giant mechanical beetles with blaster cannons for jaws. *You'd never see those in the Trade Federation army*, thought Grievous. Now the clash stretched from the ridge to the burning trees, which the droid network now identified as the northern end of the vast Laudium orchard lands. Front and center was Daijyun, the Jedi, personally smashing through the Neimoidian line, his clone troopers brazenly rushing up to throw mines on the nearest tank.

Grievous shed his cloak, and took up his lightsabers. "We're moving in," he said to his guards, though he needed not spoken word to command them. He crept forward over the three kilometers between him and the battle, crawling through ditches and behind piles of rubble. All the while, the Jedi wreaked havoc. By the time Grievous was close, the Republic and its Loyalist allies were on the verge of breaking through.

"Come on, men!" roared Daijyun, his throaty voice booming across the battlefield. "The Seps must be really desperate to be sending Neimoidians here!"

"We'll crush 'em like the rest, General," said a clone, whose armor was different from the others. The droid network tentatively identified him as the legion's commander. At a fifty-eight percent certainty.

"Men of Neimoidia, hold!" answered the same lieutenant Grievous had seen on the shuttle, who was in cover somewhere nearby. The cracks of slugthrowers and sizzle of blasters drowned out all other noise after that. An AT-TE emerged from behind a burning warehouse, vaporizing a house that had been hiding a group of Neimoidians and Agamarians. In turn, one of the beetle tanks scaled a pile of rubble, and sent a red laser lancing through the leg joint of the Republic walker.

In this mess, Grievous was first noticed. He took shelter behind a low stone wall, where four Agamarians were huddled. He could only see their eyes behind the lenses of their gas masks, but they looked more shocked by his presence than the battle going on. Grievous didn't address them, he just stared until they looked away. Daijyun was only a few dozen meters away, advancing across an empty field, hand outstretched, catching slugs in mid-air and letting them fall harmlessly to the ground. *Komara could learn from that*, Grievous thought. So far, the Jedi wasn't aware of the danger he was in. But he must have thought *something* was nearby, he never stopped glancing around. Grievous turned to the Agamarians again.

"Shoot the clones," he told them.

"Uh, yes, General," said one Agamarian, whose voice cracked as he spoke.

The four conscripts opened up on the clones, and Grievous scrambled away, dust and rubble blocking him from the enemy's view. *Hopefully that'll lull the Jedi into a sense of ease*. He watched his allies flee for the cover of a ditch, clones hot on their tail. Whether the conscripts lived or died was irrelevant to Grievous, they'd done their job.

The Jedi came down the little street between two ruined houses, looking confused. "Commander, were those the only enemies here?" he asked.

"Just those four," said the commander. "There was a fifth, going by thermals, but he's gone too now. Left some weird footprints, I don't think he was Human."

"Weird footprints?" asked the Vodran, reptilian face contorting in confusion.

"Yes, General, six toes. Two in front, two on the sides, two in back."

The Jedi's mouth opened, his eyes widened, disbelieving. Before he said anything, Grievous launched himself out of the rubble, both his lightsabers snapping on. The look of horror surprise on the Jedi's face was hilarious. Here, in some nowhere farm town on a backwater dirtball of a planet, General Grievous had appeared. *Surprise, fear, intimidation!* Dooku's words echoed in his head. He had all three today.

Grievous didn't even need four lightsabers. Two were enough. He had the Jedi off-balance immediately, his magnaguards taking on the clones. Daijyun struggled to keep up with Grievous's lightning-fast jabs and slices, and after less than a minute, Grievous ground an opening, he kicked out and ripped open a gash on the Jedi's leg with a single wicked talon. Daijyun screamed, and stumbled, and Grievous stabbed him with both his blades.

The clone troopers, including the commander, were dead too. The magnaguards had crushed them, bashing helmets and skulls alike in with their electrostaves.

"Too easy," sighed Grievous, collecting Daijyun's lightsaber. He switched his internal comlink to all Separatist forces in the area. "This is Grievous. I have decapitated the Republic's leadership here. All units are to attack at once!"

While the Loyalist chain of command shifted, the Neimoidians and Agamarians hit them as hard as they could. In minutes, the Republic was on the retreat towards the town of Laudium. In an hour, Grievous had a clear enough idea of the tactical situation that he could initiate the next phase. "Kalani," he said into his holoprojector, "I've killed the Jedi general for this region and my troops have blown a hole ten kilometers wide in the Republic's lines. Send in your droids."

Hiking up the rocky ridge littered with burnt debris would have been a workout for Obi-wan, even ten years ago; hiking up the ridge while wearing a breathing mask and carrying a pack full of chemical warfare gear was even tougher. His goggles kept out the stinging smoke, but they fogged up as he sweat in the summer heat of Agamar. *I can't imagine fighting in this conditions*, thought Obi-wan. *Even the clones must be cooking alive in that armor of theirs*. As if to agree, a hot, dry gust of wind blasted over the ridge. The wind was moving the smoke right along, but that didn't matter when the smoke was being produced faster than it could be swept away. Somewhere above those dark sooty clouds came the booms of supersonic flight, one after another. *At least someone gets to see the sun*, he thought.

"All this for one Devaronian Agri-Corps worker," Obi-wan sighed to himself, while taking a break. The red glow of nearby fires made an eerie sight, and when the wind was right, he could hear the sounds of war many kilometers away.

In time, he found that Devaronian. She was hardly more than a meter and a half tall, almost a full head shorter than the clone troopers. Obi-wan couldn't make out much else about her, she was in full protective gear, walking his way.

"Are you Sanya?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Sanya. "Who are you?"

"Obi-wan Kenobi."

"Obi-wan Kenobi-" Sanya's breath caught in her throat. "Uh, *the* Kenobi?"

"There's only a few million other Kenobis out there," he said. "One hundred and twelve Obi-wan Kenobis, to my knowledge, but there's over five thousand Ben Kenobis."

"Master Kenobi..." The Devaronian tilted her head. "What are you even doing here?"

"I'm on a mission from the Council. It tangentially concerns you."

"Ah, the Council." Sanya's mood immediately turned darker, but she didn't show any outward signs. "Well, we can talk on the way back to camp in Audiun."

"I'd rather talk here, if you don't mind. I've been on the move all day."

As if the universe had heard him, his comlink activated. "*General Kenobi, be advised-*" a voice began to say, but Obi-wan turned it off.

"I meant it, let's talk, right here," he said.

"Fine, sure," said Sanya. She took something out of her pack. It looked like a droideka's shield generator, and when Sanya turned it on, it threw up a transparent blue bubble around them, three times the volume of the droideka's shield. "We made these out of captured droid parts," Sanya said, taking off her breathing mask and goggles. "It keeps the toxic fumes out, but it won't hold up to a single blaster shot with the range boosted like this. So, what are you after?"

Obi-wan removed his own mask and goggles. "I'm here to ask you about Esera Komara."

Sanya tilted her head again, giving him a quizzical look. "Esera, Esera..." she said to herself, before recognition dawned on her face. "That quiet girl? You came all the way to his hellhole to ask me about *her*?"

"Yes," said Obi-wan. "Esera Komara defected to the Separatists a few months ago, right after Coruscant. The Council believes she's fallen to the dark side. She's working for Grievous now. I've been tasked with looking into *why* this happened, and you're the one who knew her best. That's alive, at least."

The Devaronian needed a few moments to take that all in. "Esera Komara... that girl who cried when the flower she planted in the Temple garden died... joined *Grievous*?" Sanya shook her head. "No, Master Kenobi. I don't believe it. Dark side, maybe, *maybe*, if she thought it'd really help someone. But Grievous? Get out of here."

"I just climbed this ridge for the past hour, I'm not going anywhere, young lady," Obi-wan said, shaking his finger. "But it's true. All of it. Esera Komara is a traitor in the employ of General Grievous. Whether or not she fell to the dark side is... up for debate. Personally, I don't think she did. She seemed perfectly fine last we met."

"Hold on, Master," said Sanya. "I haven't seen Esera in almost seven years. I don't know about you, but I sure wasn't the woman I am now when I was thirteen. Those are a person's most formative years. I don't see how I can help you. The kid I knew at the Temple is not whoever Esera is now. Besides, you've seen her a lot more recently than me."

"That's all true," Obi-wan admitted. "But I'm not interested in just who she is now. I want to know why she became that person. And as her childhood friend, you're our last living link to that part of her life that I can find."

Sanya processed those words. "Our clan mother-?"

"Passed on," said Obi-wan. She'd been called up for active duty and killed retaking Nexus Ortai eight months ago. Leading youngling clans was a task now reserved only for the most elderly at the Temple.

"Ah." Sanya let a long breath out. "Kinda strange, you know. Someone you thought invincible when you were young turns out to be... mortal after all."

Those words hit close to home, for Obi-wan. The death of Qui-gon Jinn flashed before his eyes. And then Anakin's body floating out an airlock. Two people he thought would never die, gone in an instant. The Jedi way was to be free of all attachment, but if he could bring either of them back, he would have.

"I know how it feels," he said. "So does Komara. Her master died earlier this year."

"That's rough," said Sanya, looking away. A quiet moment passed between the two of them before Sanya spoke again. "Well, this is awkward. You came all this way to ask me about my childhood friend. But Esera wasn't really a friend of mine. She thought I was her friend, yeah, but she was more of an acquaintance to me. A tag-along, really. I put up with her because no one else would. I used to be a very nice person, I guess."

"You're right, that is awkward." Obi-wan scratched his head and looked away too. A part of him did feel sorry for that Komara girl, despite all the trouble she'd caused. There were always younglings who fell behind their peers and never fit in with the others. By all rights, Komara should have ended up in the Service Corps like the rest of them. Like Sanya. Only Olor Callo's inexplicable intervention had set her on this path. "But," Obi-wan continued, "you are one of the few people alive who's known her for most of her life. The only one, actually."

"Yeah, I suppose I am." Sanya looked out from the shield bubble, at the dark, ruined landscape around them. "So, we're just gonna sit in this wasteland and talk about a girl I haven't seen in seven years?"

"Unless you have a better idea..."

Sanya gave him a glum look, and then began. "She was small. I don't mean just in height, I mean in spirit. Quiet, shy, timid, passive, I don't know how many other words I can think of. Even back then it was clear to me that this girl was never going to make it as a Jedi. I don't know why you masters even brought her to the Temple. Maybe you needed one more grunt out in the fields?" Sanya smirked, but in her heart, there was a very real and simmering discontent. "I mean, you tore a little girl from her family because you thought you could make her into something like you. I don't know what you expected. If the Order can take three year-olds, it can take ten year-olds. But it can't take ten year-olds unless they're named Skywalker, so really, it should only be taking infants, like me or you. Maybe someone had a quota to meet, I don't know. The point is, Master Kenobi, I don't think she ever got over that trauma of being taken from a place she knew to the Temple. And if you're trying to make an unfeeling machine out of a person, that's a really bad way to start."

Obi-wan stroked his beard. What Sanya had just told him said as much about herself as it did Komara. "You pity her?" he asked.

"I did, yeah, back then. She had no place being at the Temple, we all knew it. When I heard Master Callo took her as his apprentice, I was shocked." Sanya's heart oozed a strange mix of jealousy and sadness. "And yet, I wonder, if it really was the best thing for her. She's with Grievous now, you say. I can't even imagine how that happened. The girl I knew would have hid away in some dark corner of the galaxy and stuck her head in the sand. This Esera out there now, she's not that girl. Callo turned her into someone I don't think I'd recognize today. I don't know what else I can tell you."

I don't know what I was expecting, thought Obi-wan. *I knew Sanya and Komara hadn't seen each other in years, why did I think Sanya would have some insights that eluded me?* But maybe that's just who he was. The Komara case intrigued him. How a Jedi could end up in the service of Grievous was utterly baffling. How could it happen? And more importantly: how could it be stopped from happening again? Krell, Oftee, Komara; this war would destroy the Order from within if they let it. And now here was Sanya, a very unhappy service corps worker.

"Sanya, you have some curious ideas about the Order," Obi-wan said. "No one wants you to be a machine."

"Yeah?" Sanya crossed her arms, not looking convinced. That discontent beneath her surface was rising, and bubbling into something greater. She recited the Jedi code: "*There is no emotion, there is peace*. Let me tell you something, Master Kenobi, I sure as hell don't see any peace around here. Let alone *feel* it." The Devaronian jerked her thumb behind her, at the dead land. "You know what I do feel? Anger, fear, bitterness, frustration... And I'm just supposed to ignore these. Lock them away somewhere, forever."

The Jedi Order was in a very bad state indeed, if its youth were questioning even the most basic principles of the Jedi Code. Obi-wan frowned. "Sanya, no one can be the perfect Jedi. I know I'm not. And if I can't do it, *no one* expects you to be perfect. There's always moments when you're going to be angry or frustrated. Part of being a Jedi is learning how to overcome those feelings, and see the clear path."

"Oh, come on!" Sanya almost yelled, throwing her hands up. "I've been slogging through firestorms and nerve gas for seven months now, trying to preserve some scrap of this hellhole planet, and you just want me to be some serene statue about it all?"

"It's that, or the dark side," Obi-wan said, keeping his voice as calm and level as he could. "We don't have the luxury of losing control, like normal people. Even when we want nothing more than to."

"Yeah, well, I am, Kenobi," said Sanya, who then stood up, and paced around inside the shield bubble, her dark eyes glistening. She held her forefinger and thumb a hair's width apart. "I'm *this* close to losing it. Loyalist, Separatist, I don't know who I hate more. And I do hate them both, Kenobi, I do."

This is definitely not good, Obi-wan thought. "Sanya, we *need* to be here-" he started, but his very attempt to soothe her was what set her off.

"Shut up!" Sanya screamed. "Just shut up and open your eyes for once! Look at this," she pointed out at the devastated countryside, littered with the charred remains of towns and orchards, under a red sky. "Look at this, and tell me this *needed* to happen. Don't hide behind the Council's decisions, or the oath to the Senate, look with your own eyes and you tell me this stupid war makes a single iota of sense. Go on, do it."

"War seldom does make sense," said Obi-wan. "And every moment this conflict continues is a tragedy. But the alternative was letting Count Dooku and the Sith have their way with the Galaxy. And that would be even worse than this war. You had your history classes at the Temple. You know what the Sith Empire did to its subjects."

The Devaronian girl had no answer to that. She sat down again, face in her palms. Obi-wan gave her all the time she needed to gather her thoughts and control her feelings. "We're supposed to keep peace and protect life," she finally said, in a quiet voice. "But every day, I see Jedi generals like you leading their clones down that road. Every day they're killing hundreds of people who never did us any harm until we invaded their land. Every day I see men and women who came here all the way from Cademimu just to die when a single drop of toxic vapor touches their skin. This is insanity, Kenobi. Even if we conquer Agamar, it will take centuries for this planet to recover from what's been done to it in a single year. How is this any better than living under the Sith? If the Separatists even are led by the Sith, now that Dooku's dead? *If* Dooku even was a Sith. Kinda convenient your apprentice executed him, huh?"

"Because under the Sith, there would be nothing left *to* recover, centuries from now," Obi-wan said. He was going to ignore her remark about Dooku, and he wasn't going to tell her about Sidious's unknown whereabouts. This service corps worker didn't even have the clearance to know about Sidious to begin with.

"Maybe you're right, Master Kenobi," Sanya said. "My brain says you are. But my heart tells me no. These people wouldn't be burning their own homes to the ground if they didn't believe in what they were doing. None of this is right. None of this should be happening."

"No, it isn't, and it shouldn't be. But here we are." He stood up, and offered her a hand. "Come on, Sanya, let's get back to camp."

Sanya took it. "Yeah," she murmured, utterly dejected. "I could use a few hours of sleep before the next fire gets out of control."

As they walked back to camp, masks and goggles back on, Obi-wan once again heard the sounds of war on the wind. Over their hour-long descent, those sounds only grew louder. "They're really going at it, out there," Obi-wan said.

Sanya stopped, and cupped a hand to her ear. "That's weird," she said. "They mostly moved out of earshot last week. They shouldn't be this close to Laudiun."

The two exchanged a look, eyes hidden behind the glassy goggle lenses. Suddenly, that comlink message he'd gotten earlier made far too much sense. "We need to move," Obi-wan said.

As Esera expected, Ado Eemon's study was as austere and minimalist as the rest of his palace. A picture of a brown-haired woman sat on his desk, almost certainly Eemon's deceased wife. No other hints of a personality showed in the room. *Lieutenant Voyan and this guy have that in common*, thought Esera.

"So, Mister Eemon," she said. "We've got something to discuss."

"Yes, we do." Eemon sat down at his desk, and gestured for her to pull up a chair. "I hear you and your subordinates constitute the entirety of Confederate Naval Intelligence."

That wasn't what Esera had been expecting to hear. An incredible disappointment filled her. "Oh. Um... yeah. We are, I guess."

"A seventeen year-old former Jedi is hardly who I'd expect to be handling such an important undertaking," said Eemon. He raised his hands. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not dismissing you on that basis. But in a field like intelligence, where relationships and trust are everything... forgive me if I doubt your resources, Captain Komara. You simply haven't lived long enough to build the bridges someone my age has. Or Clothar Aclinde."

"I see," said Esera. She wanted to get to the point of all this.

"Right now, Aclinde controls every bit of information that ends up before Grievous. Or at least, information that originates outside the Droid Army, if my analysts are right. This is how Aclinde operates. He who controls information is your master, and Aclinde's the kind of man for whom nothing is ever enough. That's why we tried to kill each other a few years back, you see. And that's why I'm talking to you now." Eemon pulled a datapad out from a drawer in his desk. "This is a key, Captain Komara. It will give you full access to the Carammite intelligence network. Anything that comes our way will come your way. Our analysts and cryptologists are your analysts and cryptologists. Our spies and agents are your spies and agents. And I assure you, we have far more resources at our disposal than Aclinde and his gang of exiles. I purge my ministries yearly, you know."

"Well," said Esera, taking the datapad. On one hand, she knew this boon was too great to refuse. She would make herself even more indispensable to Grievous, she would have even more power to bring this war to the conclusion she desired. But on the other, how much of this information was coming out of the nerve staples and punishment spheres Aclinde had so gleefully described? Could she use this in good conscience?

"Is that all you have to say?" asked Eemon.

"I'm not going to pretend you're not an evil man," Esera told him. "If I accept your help, I benefit from all the horrible things you do here."

"Yes," said Eemon.

"I don't know if I should accept this."

Eemon smirked. "There's that Jedi morality," he said. "As inflexible and impotent as ever. But you need to look at the big picture, Captain Komara. I am an evil man, yes. But Clothar Aclinde is worse. And your cyborg friend out there? He was made to be a weapon. I can help you wield that weapon, or we can watch and see what Aclinde does with it. I guarantee you, Aclinde will make what I've done on Caramm look like a joke."

He's right, damnit, thought Esera. She sighed, and took the datapad. "Fine," she said.

"Good girl," said Eemon. "I don't suppose I could ask you to kill Aclinde if you ever have the chance, can you?"

"Honestly, it's crossed my mind," said Esera.

"Well, follow your heart, then. It hasn't led you wrong yet. Though letting Aspar live was very silly of you." Eemon wagged his finger at her. "I would have killed him right then and there."

"How do you know about that?" Esera asked, scowling.

"Check the datapad, you'll see," said Eemon.

"You Carammites are infuriatingly smug!"

"Racism and Stalimurians, they go together like onions and fennel," Eemon said, rolling his eyes.

"I don't even know what a fennel is," huffed Esera. "I'm done here, Mister Eemon. Thank you for--"

"Oh, don't go so soon, my dear Captain. Don't you want to hear about Tyranus?"

Mid-step, Esera stopped. She turned back to face the *truly* and infuriatingly smug Warlord of Caramm. "I wanted to ask how you knew that name," Esera said.

"Many of us industrialists know it. Tyranus was running around for years, placing orders for weapons, ships, droids, and more. For a long time we thought he was a high level Separatist agent. Until we discovered Tyranus had also been working on the Republic's behalf... So how could Tyranus be a Separatist?" Eemon leaned forward, hands folded in front of him. "But we both know Tyranus and Dooku were one in the same, don't we? So you tell me, Captain Komara... what's going on here?"

"I wish I knew," said Esera. "But you're the first one besides Grievous that I've met who knows Tyranus and Dooku were the same person. That's a dead end, though. There's another name you should be looking into."

"Would that be that illusive man known as Sidious?" asked Eemon.

Esera gave the Warlord a glum look. "I'm not even surprised you know his name too."

"All we've got on Sidious are whispers. Whoever he is, anyone who knows that name is terrified of him. What's really interesting though, is that he disappears right around the same time Dooku died. We haven't heard a peep about him since Coruscant." Ado Eemon stroked his beard. "So, was Sidious another front for Tyranus? Or did Grievous manage to get them both killed in a single day?"

"I think he's dead," said Esera. "All that remains is to figure out who he was."

"You know more about him than me," said Eemon. "I've included everything we've got on Tyranus and Sidious in that datapad. I hope it serves you well... And when you do unravel the mystery, you'll tell me, right?" Eemon flashed a charming smile at her, one that would have dazzled her if she hadn't known how much blood he had on his hands. Even so, Esera still felt a *little* dazzled.

"Sure," Esera sighed. "I'm going to round up my crew, now."

"Why leave?" asked Eemon. "You're guests, enjoy the stay. It's not like your ship will be ready to leave for a few more days."

"We're fully capable of blasting our way out of here, you know."

"Threats of violence and Stalimurians *also* go together like onions and fennel." Eemon shook his head. "If you want to return to your ship, you can, no one will stop you. Or you can enjoy the wonders of my planet and the hospitality of my people. I'm sure Alize would appreciate a few days to get a full taste for Carammite cuisine. She hasn't even found out what those little green gourds you liked so much aboard Ricimer's ship are."

Esera narrowed her eyes. "We've only just met but it feels like you know *a lot* about me."

"You don't survive forty-seven assassination plots without having a few spy rings," said Eemon. "I must attend to business now, Captain. Thorne Kraym will want to know his little assassin is alive and well. Don't worry, I won't be sending her home."

"Uh, thanks." As she left, Esera realized that Eemon had managed to dismiss her, despite her multiple attempts at leaving. *Outwitted by an older politician once again*, thought Esera. At least it was a petty little powerplay, and not a planetary invasion, this time.

"This is not good," Obi-wan said, peering through a gap in the rubble of a farmhouse. First, it'd been Neimoidian warriors and Agamarians advancing down the road. Now it was regular droids, in their repulsor craft Obi-wan had first seen thirteen years ago on Naboo. They were painted grey and blue now, rather than tan and brown.

"You don't say?" Sanya said, checking the seal on her breathing mask. The threat of chemical warfare was to the north of here, but with the front moving this rapidly, anything could happen. Obi-wan knew they were both dead if the Separatists decided to nerve gas this area, even a few molecules on a sliver of exposed skin would be fatal.

"Until they stop, we can't stop," said Obi-wan.

"Yeah," agreed Sanya, but with weariness in her voice. She was slow to get up. This girl had been fighting a fire for hours before Obi-wan even ran into her, and now they'd been hiking cross-country for hours more. But they couldn't move as freely as the Separatists, now that the front had passed them. Being careful caused them to fall further behind. The rest of the Jedi service corps had evacuated when they'd gotten the message Obi-wan ignored. *Not my brightest moment*, he thought. All communications were jammed, now.

Until nightfall, they trudged on through scorched fields and between blackened fallen logs the size of small starships. Soon the only light was the burning glow on the horizon, of fires and artillery. "I'm sorry, master," Sanya gasped, "I need to stop."

They stopped. "I've got no water left," said Obi-wan.

"Great. That's great."

The next day, Sanya was not doing well. Exhausted and dehydrated, she became slower and slower. They had to stop chasing the front to find a source of water not contaminated with toxic compounds. Obi-wan found a cistern that had somehow not boiled off in a half-torched house. But before they could take anything from it, an Agamarian patrol arrived, seeking what they sought. The two Jedi hid behind a low wall, staying as still as possible.

"Clean water, fill up everything you've got," one Agamarian said, his voice rough and gravelly.

"Yes, sir," said another, his voice much softer and higher. Obi-wan saw the Agamarians unmasked for the first time. There wasn't a fighting-age man among them. One older fellow with wrinkles and grey hair was leading a band of boys, none of whom could have been older than sixteen, most were too young to have started shaving. All of them looked like they hadn't eaten substantially in weeks, cheeks hollow and faces gaunt.

"Where are we, sergeant?" asked one of the boys.

"Belgora, I think," said the old officer. "It's hard to tell, after the fires."

"I heard Grievous is here. Does that mean we're going to win?"

Obi-wan and Sanya looked at each other. *Grievous? Here? Why?*

"We're finally moving in the right direction, anything could happen," the sergeant said, carefully avoiding the word *win*. None of them wore helmets or armor, just caps and fatigues. They were armed with the battle droid weapon of choice, the E-5, though droids these boys and one old man were not. They'd wrapped the barrels in cloth and wore heavy gloves; even though the Agamarian summer was hot, the E-5's waste heat was hotter.

"We're gonna get to go home, then?" another of the young soldiers asked, a hopeful look on his face. The sergeant let out a long breath, and looked away.

"We'll see," he said.

Every one of them is drawing as much water as their canteens can hold, thought Obi-wan, at this rate there'll be none left for us... That wouldn't do at all. "Stay here," he whispered to Sanya.

"What are you-"

"Ssh!" Obi-wan stepped out from behind the wall, doing his best to act casual. "Hello there," he said to the Agamarians.

The officer raised his blaster, but the boys just stared, confused. "Who the hell are you?" asked the officer, waving for his troops to raise their own guns, which they did, belatedly.

"Just a thirsty traveler," said Obi-wan. "You wouldn't mind sharing this water, would you?"

The old man's eyes glanced up and down over Obi-wan. "That's a laser sword," he said. "You're one of those Jedi."

"Guilty as charged," said Obi-wan. "But I'm not here to harm anyone-"

"You hear that, boys?" the sergeant asked his troops, who'd all visibly paled at the word *Jedi*. "The Jedi's not here to bring harm! Wouldn't your fathers and brothers like to hear that?"

"I'll have you know I just got here yesterday," Obi-wan told them. "I'm totally outside the Republic chain of command."

"The Jedi lies as easily as he breathes," the sergeant said. "If we stand here long enough, he might even convince us he's telling the truth. Do you know how we avoid that, boys?"

"How, sergeant?" asked one of the soldiers.

"By killing him." The sergeant pulled the trigger, but even as his finger squeezed, Obi-wan's lightsaber was in his hands and the blue blade blazing on. He sent the red bolt ricocheting away. Then, all the others started blasting frantically, their accuracy making even droids' look good. Obi-wan didn't even have to try to block half the shots, which gave him all the breathing room he needed to send the bolts harmlessly into the sky or ground.

"You'd all better start running," Obi-wan said, beginning to walk towards them. He felt their fear as clearly as he saw it in their eyes. "I might decide I'd rather get rid of you all instead of having my drink of water." Nearly all the Agamarian boys broke, they fled the ruined building. One stayed, and so did the sergeant, still trying to shoot Obi-wan futilely. Finally, Obi-wan flicked his blade against a blaster bolt, sending it into the knee of the last soldier, and then tried to bounce the last bolt into the sergeant's arm. It hit him square in the chest instead. Both Agamarians fell to the floor.

"I really didn't want to do that," sighed Obi-wan. "Sanya, you can come out now."

Sanya emerged from their hiding spot. The Agamarian soldier gasped when he saw her, and he tried to push himself up against the wall. "You're an alien!" he stammered, eyes wide.

"No, I'm a Devaronian," Sanya said. "*You're* the aliens to me, all three of you."

"Sanya, do you have any medpacks?" asked Obi-wan.

"Uh, yeah... Hold on."

The sergeant's breathing was shallow and uneven. His life energy was leaking away, Obi-wan could feel it. The shock of a blaster bolt to the lung had been too much for him, in his weakened state. Obi-wan knelt down next to him. "There's nothing I can do to save you," he said. "Not out in the field like this."

"Why would you even try?" wheezed the sergeant.

"It's the Jedi way," said Obi-wan. "Sanya, get that boy's leg patched up."

The old Agamarian regarded him with narrowed eyes, before his expression softened, the fight going out of him. "Thank you," the sergeant said.

"Sergeant-?" the young soldier asked, crestfallen at what he was hearing.

"Don't worry about me, kid," said the sergeant. "You get back to the army the moment you can walk, you understand me? Getting shot for desertion at fifteen is a bad way to go. A lot worse than getting shot in battle at sixty-two."

"Yes, sergeant," said the boy, his voice wavering. He didn't dare look at the alien girl wrapping his knee in a bacta patch.

"You should have shared the water, sergeant," Obi-wan told him. "I really didn't want to hurt anyone."

"Well, I see that *now*-" The old man coughed, each breath rattling his body. "But forgive me if it was hard to believe after all this."

"All patched up," Sanya said. "You'll be good to go by nightfall, if you can find a crutch." The boy just nodded.

"How long do I have?" asked the sergeant.

"Minutes, hours, a day, maybe," Obi-wan told him. "All I can tell you is that you're dying."

"Wonderful," he said. "You two go take your water. The kid and I'll stay here and rest for a while."

They did exactly that, and quietly moved on. An awkward silence hung in the air between the two of them, until Sanya spoke: "Kalani doesn't rotate the conscripts out. They serve on the front until they're dead. I don't think we did that kid any favors."

"They weren't a threat to us, anymore. Helping them was the right thing to do," said Obi-wan.

"Well, at least we got something to drink. I'd kill for a ration bar, though."

On they went, seeking the safety of the Republic lines.

The city of Calna Muun had once been the vibrant, if provincial, capital of Agamar, a city that might have been found on Kalee, before the war. It was low to the ground, old, and cramped. Grievous felt almost at home among the ancient timber frames and bricks and tiled roofs. Everything about Calna Muun had a northern Kaleesh feeling to it.

Kalani, the super tactical droid who de facto ruled the planet, was doing his best to transform it into something else. Wide swathes of ancient houses had been razed, both to make gigantic hulking factories for droids and weapons, and to build fortifications. *The Republic could burn this city to ash in a single night*, Grievous thought. For some reason, they hadn't. Grievous stared at a group of refugee women, huddled together, eyes downcast, walking quickly along with what meager rations they'd been doled out today. He was sure he knew the reason this city still stood.

And it was almost only women, in Calna Muun. Here and there, there were a few elderly men, but most of the remaining males were just boys, far younger than even Komara, the youngest Human Grievous knew. For several months now, Kalani had been conscripting every able-bodied male between fourteen and sixty-four. The women of the city, whose sons, brothers, husbands, fathers, and even grandfathers had been taken from them, were anything but happy. But they knew their men were fighting and dying for their world. All Grievous could have asked more from them was that they go out and fight beside their men, as Kaleesh did. When he brought this up to the Agamarian generals and marshals who had greeted him at the command center, who looked as hungry and tired as their troops, even in their crisp parade uniforms and gleaming medals, they shook their heads.

"Absolutely not, sir," said one marshal. "This isn't a war between two different species where death is all that awaits the captured, this is a war between Humans. Our soldiers would be inclined to do stupid things to prevent any of our women from falling into Cademiman hands, or worse, clone hands."

Grievous snorted. "It is foolish to keep half your population barred from battle," he told them.

"We will not accept it, sir," the marshal said, staring ahead stoically.

"I could make you accept it," Grievous said, looming over the man. But much like Tyrecca Bremack, that stout old crone in the Separatist congress, this was not a man to be cowed. There was a stubbornness inherent to this race.

"We have destroyed half our planet for a dozen generations to come for this war, sir. This is where we draw the line. Your droid listened, I implore you to as well, General."

"I cannot doubt the courage of the Agamarian race," said Grievous. "It is regrettable how many of you are not allowed to express this courage and earn glory on the battlefield."

"There is no glory to be had in war, General," said the Agamarian. "We fight for our land and our freedom, nothing more."

Kalani was less irritatingly obtuse. There was no question as to who called the shots here, the Agamarians did as Kalani told them. "The Loyalist armies are in disarray, the time to strike is now," said the super tactical droid to the Agamarian general staff and newly-arrived Niemoidian commanders. "Romodi will not yet have a full picture of what's happened. We must keep them off-balance. Therefore, the Thirty-Eighth and Thirty-Ninth Armies will open a counter-offensive on the eastern front to keep the Loyalists unsure of our true intentions."

"General Kalani, those armies are on the verge of collapse," said an Agamarian officer.

"I am aware." Kalani's voice was as cold and implacable as an asteroid. "My orders stand."

"Yes, sir."

"It won't be long until the Ciutricenes arrive," Kalani went on. "When they do, we will have the forces to attack on all fronts. All we must do is keep the Loyalists off-balance."

"Eight hundred thousand troops are being organized on Ciutric right now," Grievous said. "As quickly as they can be called out of hiding, now that the Republic's occupation is over. A further seven million demobilized troops are also being called up. The first will arrive in a week, the rest over the next three weeks. In six months time, once their own conscription program is active, the whole Ciutric Hegemony will have two hundred and forty million troops ready for battle." Some of the Agamarians made choking noises. There weren't even two hundred and forty million people on their entire planet.

"General, surely not all these troops will be coming here..?"

"No," Grievous said. "I doubt the Republic will have the stomach to match those numbers for but one planet. And I don't intend for there to be any Loyalists left on Agamar in six months."

Very few of those Ciutricenes would ever see battle, if all went to plan. Grievous and the Hegemony's government had agreed it would be better for organic troopers to operate as garrison forces, freeing up the logistically less-demanding droid armies for mobile operations. He himself had been surprised at just how many fighting men and women the Ciutric government could call upon. But the long peace of the Republic's golden age had been anything but peaceful for the Outer Rim. The Ciutricenes had fought many wars over those supposedly peaceful centuries. On Coruscant, they would have been considered local squabbles between poor, distant planets in poor, distant sectors. Out here, it had been the thirty-one billion citizens on the twenty-five planets of the Ciutric Hegemony waging interstellar war upon migrating barbarian invaders, slave raiders, exiled Mandalorian tribal fleets, and even the some of the commerce guilds at points. Grievous could draw parallels to his own wars on Kalee when he'd read the Ciutricenes had often absorbed the defeated barbarian invaders by settling them on their less-populous worlds, turning dangerous enemies into powerful allies. Some descendants of those invaders, the Mandalorian tribesman especially, had kept in touch with their warrior ancestry, and Grievous planned to use them like he was using the Neimoidians here on Agamar.

Strange reports came from captured soldiers the Neimoidians had brought in, strange enough that Grievous visited a prisoner-of-war camp himself for more information. The camp was only lightly guarded; the Agamarians didn't have enough food to feed themselves, let alone the enemy; many of the inmates were slowly starving to death, the same as their captors. Most were so weak they wouldn't have been able to walk out the front gate if it'd been left open. In the huk war, no quarter had been given or received, so feeding prisoners was something alien to Grievous. But seeing the misery of the prison camp, where even the grass had been torn up to be eaten, Grievous felt disdain. *A warrior should die in battle*, he thought. *Not be subjected to this...*

"What is the meaning of this?" Grievous asked the Agamarian colonel who ran the camp.

"The smoke's causing a lot of crops to fail," said the colonel, Yorand, pointing at the filthy haze that had turned the sky yellow. "We've been under siege for over a year, General. Nothing's come in until you showed up."

"It would be better to kill them quickly," said Grievous. "Or better yet, for them not to have surrendered and fought to the death."

"Fighting to death is an Agamarian trait," said Colonel Yorand. "We fight to save what little we have. These clones, they have no soul, they just do as told. The Cademimans are from a rich world, they have much to live for, and fear death. They are poor soldiers."

Grievous didn't agree with that. Indeed, some recently captured Loyalists here weren't clones, but instead the Cademiman 'auxiliaries,' who were every bit as good front line soldiers as the clones. Stripped of armor and weapons, they maintained what uniforms they had left and kept a disciplined life in the camp, doomed as they were to a drawn-out death of starvation and infection. The men and women had formed separate camps, each with its own sentries, unarmed as they were. Grievous suspected the Agamarian fears on the fate that awaited captured female warriors originated closer to home than they'd admit.

"Who is in charge here?" asked Grievous, walking straight into the prisoner's camp. The Cademimans stared in shock and awe that the monster of nightmares stood among them. A tough, wiry, middle-aged woman came out from among their tents.

"I am Major Dienu," she said, eyeing Grievous with alarm, but keeping her voice professionally level. "What is your business here, General?"

"Intelligence," Grievous said. "There are reports of another Jedi in the Laudiun sector of the front you served on. Your unit was there just a few days ago."

"And why should we cooperate?" asked Major Dienu.

"That is a discussion best held in private." Grievous waved his hand to her tent.

Dienu balked at having the enemy of her nation in her tent, but she conceded. The tent was barely high enough for Grievous to stand in, hunched over as he was. Dienu took her seat on a folding chair behind a folding desk.

"You Cademimans fight well," Grievous said. "I could threaten you with torture, and I could break you until you talked, but you wouldn't make it easy or quick for me."

"I'm flattered you think that highly of us," said Dienu, obviously not flattered at all. Grievous stalked over to her desk, leaning over her until she had to look almost straight up to meet his eyes.

"But I am pragmatic," said Grievous. "I want everything you know about this Jedi, and in return I will see to it that every Cademiman on this side of the front lines is transferred to the prison islands on Karkaris. You will find neither food nor medicine lacking there." Dienu had not been expecting such a fair offer. The woman looked troubled, as her military conditioning of never cooperating with the enemy battled with her duty to ensure the well-being of her warriors. Grievous lowered his voice, and leaned over until his vocoder was in her ear. "Agamar is a death sentence for you and your warriors. How much have they given you to eat, in the days you've been in this camp? How many of your wounds have been treated? You're living on boiled grass and rat-flesh already. The Agamarians can't even take care of their own army, let alone their enemies."

"I... I cannot accept this offer-" Dienu began to say.

"Don't be stupid, woman," Grievous growled. "Prisoner exchanges are routine. You can preserve your warriors in good health on Karkaris, saving them to fight another day. Or you can all waste away here. There's a reason there's no prisoners in this camp who have been here longer than a month or two, you know."

Dienu sighed. "Damn you, monster," she said. "How do I know you can be trusted?"

Grievous called up Admiral Tuuk on his holoprojector, and ordered him to begin to make arrangements to transfer several thousand Cademiman prisoners to Karkaris. Dienu folded like a blanket after that. "I am only doing this so my soldiers can live," she said. "I don't give a damn about those stinking Jedi, anyway. Cademimu must come first."

"I almost like you, major," Grievous told her. "It is a shame Cademimu is on the wrong side of this war."

"These selfish peasants cut our food imports without warning, General," Dienu said coldly. "Agamar had been our world's food supplier for three hundred years. They threw that away over a tax dispute, and condemned us to starve. Now they're the ones starving. And you know what? They had it coming."

More than anything, at that moment, Grievous wished he could put Major Dienu in the same room as Komara. The showdown between these two diametrically-opposed women would have been spectacular. By the end of the day, Grievous had what he came for. They had seen a Jedi with a reddish beard who had been assigned to no unit, last seen in the Laudiun region. Grievous quickly looked through droid network reports: a Jedi interceptor had landed at this planet half a day before the Separatists had begun their attacks.

"Kenobi!" Grievous growled. He rounded up his magnaguards, and informed Kalani he was going out to hunt another Jedi. The glee on the Agamarians' faces' could not have been more evident, especially the colonel. "Do you have a history with Kenobi?" Grievous asked them.

"Never even heard the name," said Colonel Yorand. "The Jedi came here and told us we wouldn't last three weeks against their army, that nothing here was worth dying for, that a bunch of farmers and woodsmen would never stand against the Republic."

"They were horribly wrong," Grievous said.

"You're damn right, sir," Yorand agreed. "Do you know what it's like General? To throw off the yoke of foreign domination, to tear up the unfair treaties, to know what you've built with your sweat and blood will never belong to anyone but you and your own?"

"Yes," said Grievous. The two locked eyes, and Grievous could see a kindred spirit in this man.

"Then you know why we hate the Jedi so much. They speak about understanding and compromise as they come to take what is ours by every natural law. They cry out about how we've burnt our orchards and cities and poisoned our lands as we retreat, even as they kill us for defending our world. The thought of you going out there and cutting down those arrogant hypocrites the same way they've cut us down..." Yorand shook his head, even as he grinned. "It sends tingles down my spine, General. If I could be on the front right now, I would be, just to see it."

I was you, once, Grievous thought. *Poor and overpowered, fighting against the might of an alien invader unimaginably more powerful*. What was it like, to be this colonel, and have Grievous step down from the heavens to deliver his nation from certain destruction? He didn't know. But he did know that the greatest quality of a king was to inspire his warriors. *Then let them be inspired*, he thought.

"Your duty is here, Colonel Yorand. But when Agamar is free once more, I will look for you on the field of battle," Grievous told him.

"If I don't die of hunger first!" Yorand laughed. But when he walked away, after escorting Grievous to the gate, he stood a little taller than he had before.

Outside Ado Eemon's great palace, Caramm was a world of fear. The streets were not quiet or empty; quite the opposite. Crowds went about their business under the grey skies, merchants plied their wares, the speederways were full of vehicles all through the day and night. But once she was down on the streets, Esera felt the underlying tension in everyone. Even Voyan picked up on it.

"It's like they're all looking over their shoulder," he muttered to Esera as they searched a market for Carammite food.

"Yeah, and usually they're looking at us," Esera said back.

The two of them were getting *a lot* of dark looks. The thoughts of the Carammites were not so clear to Esera, but she could feel the hostility and resentment towards them, almost as much as she could smell them- the common Carammites were not ones for bathing, it seemed. *We're outsiders, maybe that's why?* No one in the crowd had blue or grey eyes like they did, but other than that, Carammites came in all hair colors, and skin tones too. It took her a while to realize that it wasn't the physiological differences the Carammites were noticing, but their clothes.

"It's the Raxian fashion," she told Voyan. "That's what's setting us apart."

"Oh," Voyan said. "Why would they dislike Raxians?"

"Let's ask," said Esera. It took them four attempts before they found a Carammite willing to talk, and by then, it was raining. The water was grey too, and had a distinct smell to it.

"Because you got us into this mess," said a roughly-clothed man who was huddling under an overhang of a building. His beard was unkempt, unlike the Eemons, and streaked with grey. "Simple as."

"We... did?" Esera asked, briefly wondering if her Jedi past had been so obvious to this random citizen.

"Yeah, you! All you rich lords and ladies from Raxus!" said the man, spitting at their feet. "Thought you could take on the Republic, make Raxus great again, like it used to be! Paying that blasted dictator billions for those horrible machines, preaching freedom while he crushes us into the pavement."

It was the first anti-Eemon rhetoric either of them had heard in their days on Caramm. "I didn't pay anyone," said Esera. "In fact, I'm trying to end this war."

"Oh, yeah? You? What are you gonna do, little schoolgirl, report that droid beast to the galactic police?" The man laughed, bitterness in his voice. "This planet used to be something, you know. Now even the rain is poison. Four liters of water a day, a five second shower once a week, the food is nothing but bug paste and algae, it costs three months' wages just to get a license to go between cities-" he paused, clenching a fist. "He calls it self-sufficiency, he does. They say the Republic was weeks away from overthrowing him, when you lot started the war. Now we'll never be free."

Voyan scowled, and spoke before Esera could. "You really think the Republic was going to help you? The same bunch of crooked politicians and lazy bureaucrats who have let Hutt Space exist for centuries? You must be delusional."

"You're the one who's delusional if you think this so-called Confederacy is going to be any different," said the man with a sneer. "What are you, anyway? The little schoolgirl's lapdog?"

Before her lieutenant could say anything stupid, Esera stepped in.

"Easy, Voyan," Esera said, putting a hand on his shoulder. She looked at the Carammite. "We took down the Zygerrian king. One day, Ado Eemon might find himself done away with too."

"Oh, dangerous words, little girl, dangerous words!" The man looked back and forth, up and down the street. "They put my whole family in the punishment spheres, I've got nothing left, so I can say whatever I want. I don't care what they do to me. You, though, the skerianas'll bag you and you'll never be seen again, rich little Raxian or not!"

"I'd like to see them try," said Esera, scowling.

The man just laughed, and wandered off. The two alleged 'Raxians' returned to the palace, having failed to find any real food in the city. Later, Esera learned the only real food grown on this planet was grown inside hydroponics bays, which only the powerful had access to. The commoners ate the bugs and algae. *I don't like Caramm*, thought Esera. *I don't like this place one bit*. The inequality of Coruscant had been something her master opened her eyes to, but this was nothing like Coruscant. Poverty and oppression mixed here like she'd never seen it before. Voyan wasn't impressed; being from Hutt Space, he'd seen even worse, Esera was certain of that.

What can I do? she wondered, alone in the room she'd been given while *Encounter* was repaired in orbit. Realistically, there was nothing she *could* do. Killing Ado Eemon would just open up a power vacuum that would make things even worse. *Ado doesn't think highly of Ricimer... maybe that's a good thing*. Esera was definitely not thinking of excuses to see Ricimer Eemon again. Making sure the son who succeeded the father was a better man was a perfectly valid course of action. She tried to ignore the heat in her face.

The days passed by slowly. Esera read up on Carammite intelligence, familiarizing herself with the names and places involved. Alize and Xiss were staying out of the city; if 'Raxians' like Esera and Voyan weren't welcome, aliens certainly wouldn't be. Boredom had set in, and was making strange bedfellows, though—hopefully—not in a literal sense. One night, Esera chanced upon Voyan and Xiss lounging on a balcony overlooking the city. An ocean of golden-orange light stretched out before them, like a glowing net made of a million little gems. If she squinted, she could see the lights of speeders among the lights of the streets and buildings. The luminous sea lit everything from below, and blotted out everything above in the night sky, but Caramm's moons.

"...I mean, if anyone knows what it's like to start over, it's you, right?" Xiss was saying to Voyan. She was leaning against the railing, back to Esera, while Voyan had found a chair and was looking out the same way. Neither of them was aware of her. The Zeltron girl's mind was somewhere else entirely.

"Me, Komara, Alize, Murshida, we're all in the same ship," Voyan said. "We're all outsiders with nowhere else to go. Well, Alize at least could go home, but there's nothing for her there. A Zygerrian woman who can't keep her man loyal isn't a respectable woman, you know. But the rest of us? This is it."

"What a sorry band of misfits Komara's rounded up," said Xiss.

"She's got a knack for it," Voyan said. "But don't think about her right now. Pretend neither of us has ever seen that little schoolgirl." That remark got under Esera's skin, as it always did, but she was more interested in seeing where this conversation was going than in punishing Voyan.

"How can I not?" asked Xiss. "She's living the life I should have!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah! I'm the brave one! The strong one! I went up against Ventress on that moon, I fought the Jabimimis to my death! I was never scared, I never cried!" Xiss brought a fist to her chest. "And what has it gotten me? My master murdered in front of my eyes, being lead to my death by that idiot Skywalker, two years of surgeries and learning how to walk again, my old enemies showing me how I'd been tricked into fighting them, and when I finally have a chance to make good on what I'd done to them? I goofed it up! I'd found a place to call home again, and now if I go back, I'll get nerve stapled for not carrying out my mission. And on top of it all, I now live off the mercy and charity of a girl I used to beat up when we were kids. Every hour I worked to become better than what I was, every day I tried to succeed, was for nothing. It's all been for nothing. Everything I've ever done, I've failed at." Zule Xiss, the ferocious warrior and condescending malcontent, sounded like she was on the verge of tears. "And it happens again and again and again. Why does everything always go so wrong, Miha?"

Esera's heart could have skipped a beat. *How are these two on a first name basis already!?* she wondered. But that wasn't the issue at hand, and she knew it. Esera could feel the shame and envy radiating from Xiss in the Force. That anyone could be envious of Esera Komara was absurd, Esera thought. Perhaps, though, her life really did look successful from the outside. She'd come from nothing and nowhere, and was now Grievous's most trusted agent in the Galaxy. To someone unaware of her own endless inner struggles, Esera must have looked like a woman who was on her way to making it.

"I don't have an easy answer," Voyan told the Zeltron. "It's a question I've had for a decade now. In fact, I've been on the exact other side of this conversation before."

"I guess I'm just young and dumb, huh?" Xiss asked, sniffing. Voyan stood up, and joined her at the balcony.

"No, Zule, you're not. Well, not dumb," he said. "This Jedi pathology of emotionlessness, it doesn't do any of you any good. Least of all a Zeltron like you."

"What are you saying?"

"If you want to know why everything's going wrong, the first place to look is within. Because the only constant is *you*." Voyan clapped her shoulder.

"Oh, wow, thanks, Miha, that makes me feel real better," said Xiss, sniffing again.

"I'm better with machines than people," Voyan said. He put his hand on her shoulder, and this time, he kept it there. "But I mean it. Stop trying to pretend you're a droid. You're not. You're a living person, Zule. You can be scared. You can be angry. You can cry. It's not wrong to feel this pain. It's not wrong to ask why others pass you by when nothing you do is ever enough to get moving. And it's not wrong to be wrong."

"What's that even mean?" Xiss asked. All the strength and bravado in her voice that Esera was used to was gone. She sounded just as weak and forlorn as Esera imagined she herself had once sounded to Grievous.

"When Komara walked back onboard *Encounter* with that Skakoan and told me she outranked me now, I knew I was wrong. I was completely wrong. And that was a wonderful place to be, now that I think back. It was scary, too. But it was where I needed to be to start making the right choices."

"How did you know what to do?"

"I didn't." Voyan shrugged with his free arm. "You can't know. No one knows. But doing *something* was better than staying wrong. Even if that something was trusting a seventeen year old failed Jedi's word. I think I realized that back on Zeltros."

For a moment, Esera was truly touched. *So I did get through to him*, she thought, as a smile spread on her face. But nothing good ever lasted for long.

"It makes me sick just thinking about it... After everything I've said and done to that girl, she's my only hope?" Xiss shook her head, and sighed again. "I guess it can't be helped. You ever told her any of this?"

"Are you kidding? Komara's hard to approach, she's a--"

Oh, I've had it with you! Esera thought, stepping forward, all warm feelings scattered. "Hard to approach? *Me?*"

Both Zeltron and Human jumped out of their skins. "Good grief, Captain, how long have you been standing there?" asked Voyan.

"I heard something about being wrong, and then *you* had the audacity to call *me* 'hard to approach!'" said Esera, crossing her arms. Xiss focused on her like a laser through the Force, but Esera was much better at controlling her thoughts and feelings. She made herself as blank as a slate wall to the Zeltron. "You're cleaning the mess hall for a week, lieutenant, I never want to hear a lie that blatant ever again."

"I mean, he's got a point," Xiss said, already back to her usual self, at least on the outside. Inside, she was upset and frightened, but there was something else in her spirit. Something not yet worthy of being called hope, but something nonetheless. "You're Grievous's personal... whatever. You're dangerous."

"I am not!" huffed Esera. "Voyan, am I dangerous?"

"You regularly throw things at me with your Jedi magic, Captain."

I hate you all, thought Esera, but she decided to take Voyan's advice and not ignore her emotions. "I hate you all," said Esera. "I'm going to go watch holodramas with Alize, you two keep... consorting, or whatever it is you're doing. I really don't want to know. By the way, Xiss, don't trust this guy, he claims he hates aliens but he used to have a Zeltron girlfriend who worked for that Nautolan you were supposed to kill. Watch yourself."

She whirled about and stormed away before either could reply, or before she could see the results of dropping that fact on Xiss. Out of the heat of the moment, Esera wasn't even sure why she'd said that. In fact, she'd probably violated the tenuous trust she'd built up with the engineer by revealing that. The first shadows of guilt ran through her spirit.

While she did spend the rest of the night watching holodramas with Alize, Esera couldn't help but think on what she'd overheard. *I know the Jedi are wrong*. The fact they'd failed to prevent a galactic war of this scale was testament to that. But what about her? *Am I wrong too*? Right now, she was ignoring the teachings of the Jedi, discovering what kind of woman she really was. But it'd left her angry, uncertain, isolated. Maybe she really was hard to approach. *Being completely wrong is a wonderful place to be*, Voyan had said. *So, how do I set myself right*?

The days passed in silence for Obi-wan and Sanya, alternating between long stretches of quiet trekking through the ruined land, or brief moments of tension and adrenaline when a Separatist unit passed nearby on its way to the front. Agamarians and Neimoidians weren't a problem, organic senses were easy to hide from, or fool, if they had to. The droids were the real threat. More than once, Sanya and Obi-wan had to hide in stillness and silence for hours as columns of droids marched by. The droids were always aware of their surroundings thanks to their information network. One morning, Obi-wan made the mistake of using the Force to crush one of their probes, he'd brought a whole platoon of B1s down on them. This wasn't a problem, B1s were nothing for a Jedi to dispatch, but then came the B2s, and then the gunship. They'd huddled for an entire morning in an irrigation tunnel until the droids decided they weren't worth spending any more fuel or energy on. After that, they avoided droids whenever possible.

They found no food on their march, either. "We could take some of their rations," Obi-wan told Sanya one evening, as another oblivious unit of Agamarian conscripts stopped to set up their camp for the night. "No droids, no weapons besides blasters, only one comlink between the lot of them..."

"There's at least forty of them," said Sanya. "There'd be no room for mercy, even that many Agmarians can hit a target if they're all shooting at it."

"They *are* the enemy," Obi-wan said.

Sanya frowned. "Kill some kids for the few scraps of food they've got?" she asked. "Sure. What's a few deaths more? It won't matter. They'll be dead soon anyway. Kalani likes throwing starving conscripts at us, make us spend ammo on them before the droids come in. Less mouths to feed at the end of the day, too. It's not so bad. They all usually die together. We find their bodies all clustered up, they're not trained enough to know to spread out. Better than dying alone, right?"

Obi-wan put his hand on his lightsaber, but he didn't take it up. Whether they held blasters and wore uniforms or not, those were children out there. Hardly older than Ahsoka had been when she'd arrived on Christophsis, a lifetime ago. A deep disgust filled his heart, and now he frowned too. Sanya's discontent came into focus now, like it hadn't before. Seven months, she'd been here, seeing these things. No wonder she was cracking under the pressure. If the casual brutality of the war on Agamar was the only part of this war Sanya saw, of course she'd come to hate both sides. What was it Shaak Ti had told him, last they'd talked at the Temple? *When I look at what the galaxy has become because of us...*

"There's plenty to eat back with our own army," Obi-wan said. "If they're going to die, it won't be by our hand."

"That's..." Sanya began to say. She stared hungrily at the quarter ration bars each Separatist soldier had for his dinner, but she then hung her head in shame. "You're right, Master Kenobi. I'm sorry I said that. Let's go."

But the going was not easy for the Devaronian. The ceaseless hard labor of firefighting and decontaminating battlefields saturated with toxic compounds had worn her body down, now the lack of food and water was draining her of what little energy she'd had left. Sanya grew slower every day, Obi-wan could see the last of her strength deserting her by the hour. This girl was at the end of her rope. She probably had been before they'd even met.

On the fourth day, Obi-wan could hear the sounds of battle on the southern horizon again. *We're close!* he thought. So close, but so far; Sanya was only covering half the ground she'd covered at the start of their journey. She stumbled along, seeming barely aware of her surroundings.

"Come on, Sanya," he told her, "we'll be back behind friendly lines by nightfall."

"Yeah, sure," Sanya mumbled. Her eyes were unfocused, and she swayed on her feet.

They had maybe five kilometers left, when a curious sound caught Obi-wan's ear. It was a kind of whirling, pulsating buzzing. He squinted north, where the Separatists came from: something was kicking up dust, and moving *fast*. The machine was wheeled; it had two wheels, in fact, like a Haifire droid. But they were smaller, and close together, big enough for maybe one or two people, or droids. Then Obi-wan saw the bone-white figure riding the machine.

"Of course," he groaned. "So much for a clean get-away."

"Huh?" asked Sanya, who was catching her breath against the burnt skeleton of a tree.

"Grievous," said Obi-wan, taking out his lightsaber. "Sanya, our lines are just a few kilometers south. Go, I'll hold him off."

Sanya gave him the same look he'd seen on countless faces of Jedi masters. "Are you stupid, Kenobi?" she asked, still leaning against the tree. "The only reason I've made it this far is because of you. I'd be lucky to make it *one* kilometer. Five... No way."

"You're no good in a fight in this condition, Sanya!"

"And I'm no good on my own either!" she said. "If this is where I die, at least let me die with someone else around."

"The only one dying will be Grievous, hopefully," said Obi-wan. He knew he was bluffing. Once again, the horrible droid general had caught him far from his best. Tired, hungry, and thirsty; Obi-wan was hardly in more of a fighting condition than Sanya.

The wheeled machine screamed closer, and there were more following it. *Magnaguards*. Grievous didn't even bother parking his machine, he just tilted it onto its side and slid it towards Obi-wan, jumping off with two lightsabers drawn.

There was no introduction, no banter, no claims of doom. Grievous attacked immediately, a cold hatred in his eyes and in his spirit. He struck fast and relentlessly, his inhuman speed sorely testing Obi-wan's defensive techniques, as exhausted as he was. The other wheeled machines stopped more gracefully, forming a loose perimeter. An arena for their duel, in the dusty ash-fields of Agamar. Grievous brought one saber down after another, battering away at Obi-wan in a brutal, graceless version of form five. More than once, he tried to use his talons to grab him, but Obi-wan was always just barely too fast for them.

They were interrupted by a burst of red light. Cyborg and Human looked at Grievous's fallen machine; where Sanya stood with a flare gun, pointed at the sky. A red flare streaked high above, deploying its little repulsorlift at the top of its arc. Whatever color a red flare meant in the droid army was unknown to them, but for the Loyalists, it meant distress. Already, Sanya was loading another flare into the gun.

"Clever," Grievous growled. "But that won't save you." His ear-antennae twitched, almost certainly a sign that he was calling in his own back-up.

"Do you really think you're going to get me, this time?" Obi-wan asked, secretly glad for this brief respite.

Grievous snorted. "Even my magnaguards could kill you, in the state you're in."

"Why don't you let them try?"

"Even like this, I'd rather do it myself."

Sanya shot another flare, and the fight was back on. Despite his boasting, Grievous was not having an easy time either. He was fighting just short of his full potential. When his ears twitched again, Grievous finally split his arms into four, and the fight was *really* on. *What does he know?* thought Obi-wan, as he backpedaled and side-stepped away from the whirlwind of light bombarding him. The wretched cyborg was on a time limit, he had to be; the frustration that Obi-wan still eluded him was mounting, Grievous was getting sloppy. Obi-wan's defensive style was paying results. He even got a small nick in on his enemy's shoulder.

And then Obi-wan heard the engines of a Republic gunship. "Playtime's over, Grievous," said Obi-wan. "I don't suppose I can get you to surrender?"

"You've said that so many times now that I've lost count," Grievous said.

"Almost as many times as you've failed to kill me?"

Grievous just roared, and charged, spinning all four of his blades. In that flurry of blows, Obi-wan suddenly felt something hot across his side. One of the cyborg's talons had sliced across his ribs, tearing a nasty bloody gash. The pain hit him a second late, and Obi-wan stumbled. Grievous cackled, and knocked Obi-wan's lightsaber out of his hands. He swung down with his blades for the killing blow, and then a flash of green blotted out everything Obi-wan could see. When his vision cleared, Grievous was a half a dozen meters away, crouched on all six limbs. The gunship opened fire again, and he scuttled for cover.

The magnaguards weren't idle; some remounted their machines and were shooting back at the gunship, others were assembling a rocket launcher. Obi-wan pushed himself to his feet, grabbed his lightsaber, and ran for Sanya, who was hiding by Grievous's own wheel-thing.

"Come on!" he shouted. "We're getting out of here!"

The gunship touched down nearby, clone troopers shooting at anything else that moved, and the turret guns joining in. One trooper pulled Obi-wan up, and Obi-wan reached down for Sanya. He had her by the arms just as the gunship began to lift off, and then something wrapped around the little Devaronian. A cable. She was yanked out of Obi-wan's hands and fell back to the ground, silent surprise on her face. Grievous had her by the throat, lightsaber at the ready, as he stared up at the gunship. Obi-wan tried to jump back out, but the clones stopped him.

"No, General!" a trooper said. "We need to leave!"

"What?" Obi-wan asked, incredulous. "We can't leave her behind!"

"Seppie fighters are in-bound, ETA thirty seconds," said the trooper. "Besides, she's agri-corp. Not vital to the war effort."

Obi-wan could only look helplessly back from the gunship as it pulled away, leaving Sanya in the clutches of Grievous. Both stared back, one with confusion and despair, and one with loathing. The gunship sped back to the Loyalist armies, Agamarian atmospheric fighters screaming at their tail until ground-to-air missiles chased them off. The gunship's medic was already fixing Obi-wan's wound up.

Not vital to the war effort, the clone had said. Young Sanya had given seven months of her short life to cleaning this planet up, only to be abandoned without an attempt made to save her, because she wasn't important enough to warrant it. After everything they'd been through, she'd been lost within sight of safety.

Obi-wan was left with a feeling as bleak as the devastated landscape of this ruined world.

Author's TED talk: This chapter's working title was "Esera discovers falafel" until I decided on the *Starship Troopers* reference, which was more thematically appropriate. Usually, my chapters are pretty subtle, but much like the movie I just referenced, this chapter is about as unsubtle as it gets. I repeatedly hit you readers over the head with a few key ideas. I wonder why that is...

I hadn't planned to write this much, but as usual, this grew in the telling. There's a tendency in military fiction to focus on either the tacticool grunts slogging it out, or on the brass sitting at conference tables with ridiculous sheen. Agamar was the perfect opportunity to fuse these two things together, and shed some light on just how un-cool life is for some grunts. As for Caramm, Caramm is a planet I *really* wanted to spend more time at (*Blade Runner* meets Saddam's Iraq is a setting I'd love to write more about), but time wouldn't allow it. But I had to at least try to show how bad some planets under the CIS are, since at least one reviewer in the past has been grated by how pro-CIS the CIS-centric AU fanfic is. God forbid the Separatists ever get a modicum of the bias Filoni gives the Republic, eh?

Speaking of that wolfaboo, this chapter was a big chance to show an element of the Clone Wars almost completely ignored by Filoni and most Star Wars writers in general: that despite the moniker of "the clonew wars" there were more people fighting in it than Jedi, Sith, clones, and droids, people who weren't mercenaries or tricked or forced at gunpoint to, people *who chose to fight because believed in what they were fighting for*. Shocking to any child of modernity, I'm sure. Both the Agamarians and Cademimans are ready to die for their nation because that's what they believe is the right thing to do when their

nations are threatened with destruction. It's almost like there's heroes (and villains) on both sides... No, wait, that's nuance, we don't like that in Star Wars. Never mind that the story of Anakin Skywalker is one man trying to do what's right from his point of view as he struggles with his fears and frustrations and is manipulated by half-truths from a mentor who is secretly the enemy of his religious order, we like one dimensional conflicts here.

Thank you for coming to my TED talk.

Name:

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